DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 729 CS 506 923

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TITLE Communication Skills for Teachers.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Communication Skills; Curriculum Design; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Teacher Education; *Teacher Education Curriculum; *Teacher Education Programs; Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

One of the most neglected aspects of teacher training is thorough preparation in the diverse communication skills that are needed by good teachers in today's schools. Pre-professional teachers require a grounding in communication theory, a thorough knowledge of how children acquire competence in their native language over years of growth and experience, an understanding of how language is used and is structured by different ethnic groups in our multicultural society, an ability to discern and to respond sensitively to the body language used in a communicative transaction, rhetorical skills for the organization and delivery of specific knowledge and skills, and a grounding in group dynamics and group discussion skills. A two-semester interdisciplinary course in communication should be required of all teacher candidates. Faculty from communication, psychology, English, and education should be involved in the planning and teaching experiences of this course. Such an interdisciplinary course should attend to both the theoretical and the practical aspects involved in the communicative act, since communication is the core of teaching. (A list of communication needs for educators is attached.) (MG)

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COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR TEACHERS

A Paper Presented

at the

Seventy-Fifth Annual Meeting

of the

Speech Communication Association

San Francisco, California

1989

by

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One of the most neglected aspects of teacher training is thorough preparation in the diverse communication skills that are needed by good teachers in today's schools. While preparing for this presentation, I took a walk in one of the large schools of the Orleans Parish metropolitan system. The centrality of communication in teaching was underscored by only casual observation. Teachers were engaged in many types of discourse. They were using language, not only to inform, to demonstrate and to question, but also to persuade, to comfort, to advise, to lead, to direct, and to express their own personal feelings, experiences, and judgments.

Any visitor to an American school can see the myriad of communication events occurring daily in our schools. Certainly, the most evident would be the explanation of subject matter content to relatively large groups of students, and the questioning of children on that information. A visitor indeed could observe teachers giving directions, demonstrating processes, and disciplining classes or individuals. But there would be teachers doing less traditional tasks. Some would be working with individual students to diagnose learning difficulties in order to offer specific help. Others would be counseling and advising students. Many would be guiding small groups, acting as a discussion leader or as a moderator of student

discussion. A few teachers could be acting as mentors for their less experienced peers, giving them practical advice on materials and strategies of instruction. A visitor might also find a number of teachers involved in private conferences with parents or with a social worker, a nurse, or a school psychologist. And others could be awaiting a private conference with their principal to present their ideas on curriculum, school organization, extra-curriculum offerings. And at the conclusion of that busy day, if the visitor were to remain after school, many teachers would still be there, leading students in extra-curricula activities. All in all, teachers would be using language in many different ways, all related to the mission of teaching.

It is apparent that no "methods" class can adequately prepare teacher education students to master the varied types of communication skills needed to professionally handle all the roles that teachers assume daily in American schools. Nor does a generic course in speech or communication theory adequately address these needs. Pre-professional teachers require a grounding in communication theory, a thorough knowledge how children acquire competence in their native language over years of growth and experience, an understanding of how language is used and is structured by different ethnic groups in our multi-cultural society, an ability to discern and to respond sensitively to the body language used in a communication transaction, rhetorical skills for the organization and delivery of

specific knowledge and skills, and a grounding in group dynamics and group discussion skills. They must also learn how to use language to persuade and to gently admonish, to affirm and to deny, and to do so with sensitivity and skill. Such a repertoire of knowledge and skills in oral communication cannot be acquired in a hit-or-miss fashion by unrelated course requirements. In reality, these abilities grow and develop over the entire pre-professional years of education and training. Yet I would suggest that a better way can be found to help students acquire confidence, ease, and skill in the use of oral language so that they will be effective professional educators.

I, therefore, offer a modest suggestion. I recommend that an interdisciplinary course in communication, two semesters in length, be required of all teacher candidates. Faculty from Communication, Psychology, English, and Education should be involved in the planning and teaching of the experiences offered in this year of study. I envision that such a course be offered in the second year of teacher training, so that the insights and skills gained can be integrated and used during the later years of teaching preparation. They would serve in good stead, not only in subsequent work in education, but also in discipline-specific requirements. Such an interdisciplinary course should attend to the both the theoretical and the practical aspects involved in the communicative act, specifically as it occurs in the context of the American school.

Theory, I insist, is essential. Theory provides a basic framework that can give the novice teacher a comprehensive and integrated perspective from which to view all communication needs. Running a classroom cannot be like following a script. The delivery of canned verbalizations to a phantom audience is not teaching. Such an "informational approach" assumes that youngsters are empty vessels passively awaiting the teacher's words of wisdom. It makes assumptions about the interests, capabilities, and intentions of students. At best, it encourages a passive type of learning that will be forgotten in too brief a time. At worst, it alienates youngsters from the symbolic world, from adults, and from their culture.

But departing from the rote lesson plan does not mean the abandonment of planning. It requires the substitution of habitual patterns of complex behaviors, coupled with a deep knowledge and love of the discipline being taught. Good theory should help young pre-professionals understand how their discipline can best be communicated and learned. Learning theory, developmental psychology, linguistic understandings, and communication theory are all needed to internalize effective teacher behaviors.

A grounding in psychological, communication, linguistic, and educational theory helps teachers make informed judgments about how symbolic experiences should be structured, modeled, and explained. Knowing how children grow and develop - cognitively, linguistically, and socially

- underscores the necessity of using analogies, stories, illustrations, models, experiments, demonstrations, and provocative questions to mediate learning. Viewing students as informants demands that teachers sensitively observe and interpret both verbal and nonverbal behaviors to meet student needs. Learning structural, as well as pragmatic differences in dialects used by different ethnic groups facilitates communication and understanding in multicultural classrooms. Studying the effects of bilingualism, and language disorders furthers the differentiation of instruction. Once the teaching-learning dyad is viewed from such a variety of perspectives, the teacher is less prone to engage is "assumptive" teaching. Instruction can be targeted to the learning needs and styles of learners in the classroom, rather than dictated by administrative or personal preferences.

But theory is not enough. That is why I suggest that educators play a vital role in such an interdisciplinary experience. Educators know the realities found in American schools. They are knowledgeable about recent research related to effective instruction. They are acquainted with models of teaching, curriculum design, and materials of instruction used in contemporary classrooms. They are knowledgeable about administrative and societal constraints facing teachers in today's schools. Educators, moreover, can assure that the skills and understandings acquired in an interdisciplinary course in communication are practiced and

used in subsequent pre-professional experiences. They can assist the future teacher transfer theoretical knowledge into instructional practice. Moreover, educators can work with their colleagues in communication to make certain that the skills taught by them do not atrophy. With the assistance of communication specialists, educators can plan for the best sequence of pre-professional experiences involving oral discourse. Site observations and learner interviews, diagnostic sessions and tutorials, parental interviews and community involvement, simulations and microteaching can all be used in teacher preparation.

The preparation of teachers is a task involving all members of the academic community. Since communication is the core of teaching, we must look seriously at the types of experiences we are offering future teachers in our universities. Whatever we are doing can be improved. Working together across disciplines requires an acceptance and a respect of other viewpoints and experiences, and demands time and administrative support. But the needs of our children outweigh the difficulties to be faced. We, as professionals, can do no less.

COMMUNICATION NEEDS FOR EDUCATORS

Knowledge:

- Developmental Linguistics
- Dialects and Bilingualism
- Pragmatics
- Language Disorders
- Learning Theory - Behaviorism/Gestalt
- Developmental Psychology
- Models of Teaching
- Communication Theory
- Curriculum Theory
- Instructional Theory and Research

Strategies and Skills

- Handling groups
- Rhetorical organization and planning
- Effective large and small group presentations
- Conducting interviews
- Handling conflicts
- Modeling symbolic experiences
- Telling stories
- Cooperative learning skills
- Interpreting non-verbal communication
- Designing interpretative questions to foster critical and creative thought
- Presenting One's Ideas to peers and superiors
- Conveying information to parents
- Listening and interpreting student talk
- Interpretative reading
- Counseling and advising